

FIELD



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PHILIP LEVINE

A *FIELD* SYMPOSIUM

PHILIP LEVINE: A *FIELD* SYMPOSIUM

When really good poets have long careers and consistent output of high quality, there's a risk, perhaps, of our taking them for granted. All any reader needs to do to avoid that risk with Philip Levine is to pick up one of his books, any book, and begin to experience or revisit the pleasures and mysteries his poems offer. One is engrossed right away, as poems lock in on their subjects and then treat them in a way that seems both open and inevitable. There is narrative, there is personification, and there is certainly passion, but this poet never settles into the predictable. Even when we recognize the recurrent themes in his work, we cannot be sure how the next take on them, and the next, will turn out. That is the "open" part; one senses that Levine is never fully satisfied with his own insights and wisdom. His imagination remains restless, unappeased, and his sense of dignity, his own and that of the animals, people, and issues he explores, never becomes condescension or pomposity. As for the "inevitable" part, we learn as we look more closely that the poems are made with great care and precision, that what may look free and spontaneous is also deeply considered and carefully crafted.

The essays collected here range across the poet's entire career, from the early "To a Child Trapped in a Barbershop," all the way to the final poem in Levine's most recent collection, *Breath* (2004), "Call It Music." Along the way they touch on familiar anthology pieces, like "Animals Are Passing from Our Lives" and the justly celebrated "They Feed They Lion," to intriguing middle and later pieces like "Let Me Begin Again," "The Fox," and "The Two." While these essays do not begin to exhaust Levine's variety and range, they at least testify to the consistency with which he has been writing ever since his first collection, *On the Edge* (1963).

One part of that consistency is an inventiveness with voice and point of view that some readers may not readily associate with Levine. If you are used to thinking of his poems as typically presented in his own voice (as with, say, a poet like William Stafford), then this symposium will re-educate you, introducing

you to a Levine who fictionalizes, adopts personas, and experiments continually with the endless possibilities inherent in the question, "Who is speaking, and why?"

Each essayist does justice to the uniqueness of the poem he or she is considering, but it is interesting that again and again, as that uniqueness is being stressed, we get glimpses of useful generalization about this poet. Thus, while claiming that the child in the barbershop is untypical in form, and to some extent content, Peter Klappert nevertheless admires its complexity of tone (a feature of Levine poems, early and late) and observes that Levine "grounds the poem in a real place but allows for exaggeration and figurative implications." That observation holds for the entire Levine canon. Similarly, in the course of her discussion of "Animals Are Passing from Our Lives," Lee Upton notes, in what might almost be thought of as an axiom for a Philip Levine collected poems: "Dignity takes many forms, as does revolt." And so it goes.

Readers will enjoy re-encountering poems they know and discovering new ones as they read through this collection of essays, deft discussions that acknowledge the uniqueness of Philip Levine's achievement without any resort to inflated praise or lofty rhetoric. It's a multifaceted portrait of a poet whose presence among us for all these years is overdue for acknowledgment and grateful celebration.

TO A CHILD TRAPPED IN A BARBER SHOP

You've gotten in through the transom
and you can't get out
till Monday morning or, worse,
till the cops come.

That six-year-old red face
calling for mama
is yours; it won't help you
because your case

is closed forever, hopeless.
So don't drink
the Lucky Tiger, don't
fill up on grease

because that makes it a lot worse,
that makes it a crime
against property and the state
and that costs time.

We've all been here before,
we took our turn
under the electric storm
of the vibrator

and stiffened our wills to meet
the close clippers
and heard the true blade mowing
back and forth

on a strip of dead skin,
and we stopped crying.
You think your life is over?
It's just begun.

AND WE STOPPED CRYING

"To a Child Trapped in a Barbershop" may be the first poem by Philip Levine I ever read. It was widely reprinted in the early 1970s and occupies a place in Levine's development comparable to the evolution of American poetry itself at the time. It's not the sort of poem we first think of when we hear the poet's name today. It doesn't *look* like a Levine poem — a tall symmetrical column of sinews and energy, free verse unfolding in syntax just a hair this side of relentless. Unlike the body of Levine's work, the poem does not identify with a particular geography or locale, not California or Spain or the industrial Midwest, though there might be a case for the last of these. "To a Child" is not concerned with ties of work and class, does not evoke members of the poet's family, is not about migrant or immigrant experience (except perhaps metaphorically), does not recover a history of prejudice and violence, is not a tribute to the Spanish anarchists. There's no boxer or jazz musician in it.

Nonetheless, the poem has Levine's characteristic mixture of narrative and lyric — at casual glance, it even looks as if it might be written in ballad or hymnal stanzas. Children are frequent presences, from the first line of *New Selected Poems* ("The children are off somewhere") through "Moradian" in the most recent collection, *Breath* ("Somewhere / there must be a yellowing photograph / of a black-haired boy in shorts, shy, smiling, / already looking away"). Sometimes the children are peripheral figures and sometimes the focus is on them — for example, the childlike victim in "Angel Butcher," the sinister brats of "The Children's Crusade." Often the child is Levine himself, Levine as son and grandson; often the poet speaks as the father of three sons.

I admire the way spare, precise detail is used in "To a Child," the way it grounds the poem in a real place but allows for exaggeration and figurative implications. The poem begins with a statement of fact as flat as an indictment ("You've gotten in through the transom") and continues with precinct-level language ("your case is closed," "crime / against property," "costs time") without turning into an exercise in extended metaphor. No

sooner has the charge been read than the kid finds himself confronting either time in stir or a face-off with the cops. I used to worry about that “transom”: How did the little monkey get up there to the window over the door? Why not just say “window” — it’s a trochee, too — ? But the *trans* matters. “Transom” comes from an Old French verb meaning “to cross,” just as “transgress” derives from Latin, “to go across.” That’s exactly what the kid has done, crossed into one of Levine’s most pervasive themes, the fall out of innocence into experience.

In a way which is almost cinematic, in the second stanza we’ve gone through the transom and see the world from the boy’s eyes. He looks into the wide, high mirror in front of the barber chair, he’s just tall enough to see his face and to see himself crying, and he has a frightening recognition: he’s separate from everyone now, even Mama, and he’s alone. It’s a moment comparable to the seven-year-old Elizabeth Bishop’s in “In the Waiting Room”: she’s been looking at “awful” pictures in a *National Geographic*, she’s in a darkening dentist’s office surrounded by strangers, she hears her “foolish, timid” aunt cry out in pain, and she thinks “you are an *I*, you are an *Elizabeth*.” Barbershops, too, are adult domains, men’s clubs for the working classes full of unfamiliar smells and dangerous instruments. No wonder a boy’s first haircut is frequently terrifying — remember what happened to Samson.

“Lucky Tiger” has been around since the 1930s and by the ’50s was the most popular barbershop brand in America. If its name reminds us of a tiger, tiger burning bright in Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, all the better. The “grease” might be made by Lucky Tiger — they make aftershave, hair tonic, creams and ointments — or might refer to products like Brylcreem or Brilliantine (if that doesn’t sound too elegant). Regardless, “don’t fill up on grease” brings to mind the automotive industry and Levine’s poems about the tedium and meaninglessness of factory work. At 15 the future poet worked in his grandfather’s “grease shop” reconditioning auto parts; he went on to places like Chevy Gear and Axle and Detroit Transmission — plenty of grease there. If that’s this child’s future, maybe his “case” really is “closed for-

ever, hopeless," maybe he is headed for a life of crime. Adam and Eve's disobedience got them expelled from Eden and sent into a world of mortality; this little anarchist's transgression is going to "cost" him "time" one way or another.

Stanza five shifts from "you" to "we" and gathers the child into a hard-bitten adult world: 'No big deal, kid, we've all gone through it.' For years I took "the electric storm / of the vibrator," a sort of diminutive thunderstorm, to refer to electric shears; I was puzzled by the seeming redundancy of "close clippers" in stanza six. My own barber, Ernesto, set me straight: barbers used to have electric vibrators for giving patrons neck and shoulder massages — and I never knew! Meeting "close clippers" with "stiffened" wills suggests crew cuts and military buzz cuts: 'the *Army* will make a man of you.' (Lucky Tiger also manufactures "Cru Butch & Control Wax" — a forerunner of hair mousse?) But the ultimate terror in the barbershop is the sound of the "true blade / mowing back and forth / on a strip of dead skin" — the barber sharpening his straight razor on a stropping leather, the long belt of "dead skin" that always hung near the chair. Or the sound of the Grim Reaper swinging his scythe.

With so much to admire in one little poem, it may seem odd to single out just one quality, but what I admire most about "To a Child" is the complexity of tones. Each reader will hear it a bit differently, but that complexity is inseparable from the handling of rhythm and enjambment. Levine has spoken frequently of his debt to John Berryman ("my one great personal mentor") and how Berryman "pushed and prodded" students "to develop skills at the old meters, at accentual meters, at experimental meters and urged us too to gain greater control over the English sentence." He has also spoken of "the fortune and misfortune" of working with Yvor Winters, who introduced him to syllabics but whose rigid insistence on form was one of the reasons Levine decided to "surrender the poem for better or worse to those forces within me able to produce writing outrageous enough to be relevant and to be American." "To a Child" is from that period of loosening up. It's in quatrains of variable syllabics (odd lines of 6-8 syllables, even of 3-5) and uses a variable rhyme scheme with

exact and inexact rhymes (e.g., worse, face, case, hopeless, grease, worse). It begins with, and keeps returning to, the underlying rhythm of English, a mixture of iambs and anapests, which it disrupts and punctuates with strong stresses:

— / — / — — / —
You've gotten in through the transom
— — / / /
and you can't get out
— / — / — — /
till Monday morning or, worse,
— — / /
till the cops come.

— / — — / /
That six-year-old red face
/ — — / —
calling for mama
— / — / / —
is yours; it won't help you
— — / /
because your case . . .

Moreover, almost every line is a set-up for a surprise or revelation in the line that follows. The initial tone, weary parent or slightly exasperated authority figure, turns wry in line 3 in a way a child wouldn't grasp ("till Monday morning or, worse"), then turns mock-threatening in line 4. The poem continues to go through modulations of tone until the end of stanza four, employing hyperbole and readymade expressions from the establishment ironically. In stanza three the speaker becomes a parody Jehovah issuing commandments — "Thou shalt not." His affectionate gruffness amuses both him and reader, but it, too, would be lost upon the boy, with whom both speaker and reader also sympathize. These minute adjustments of tone create tension and elusive layers of emotion. I've mentioned the crucial shift from "you" to "we" in stanza five: it's also a shift to darker tone.

"To a Child" may be indebted to Berryman's "The Ball Poem," which is also about loss of innocence. The differences are instructive. Berryman's poem talks in the third person about a boy who has lost his ball; it addresses the boy directly for just one sentence, then expands upon "The epistemology of loss, how to stand up / Knowing what every man must one day know / And most know many days, how to stand up...." It concludes in the first person with the emphasis where it has been, really, all along, on the speaker's unsupportable grief. By contrast, "To a Child" ends by *focusing* on what every man must one day know: "We've all been here before / ...and we stopped crying. / You think your life is over? / It's just begun." In 1977, in an interview with Calvin Bedient, Levine put it another way: "I don't like these wisdom machines telling people how they ought to live.... I don't have the answer to anything, except 'Keep trying, kid, buddy, old man.'"

ANIMALS ARE PASSING FROM OUR LIVES

It's wonderful how I jog
on four honed-down ivory toes
my massive buttocks slipping
like oiled parts with each light step.
I'm to market. I can smell
the sour, grooved block, I can smell
the blade that opens the hole
and the pudgy white fingers

that shake out the intestines
like a hankie. In my dreams
the snouts drool on the marble,
suffering children, suffering flies,

suffering the consumers
who won't meet their steady eyes
for fear they could see. The boy
who drives me along believes

that any moment I'll fall
on my side and drum my toes
like a typewriter or squeal
and shit like a new housewife

discovering television,
or that I'll turn like a beast
cleverly to hook his teeth
with my teeth. No. Not this pig.

YES. YES, THIS PIG

Years ago, while I was reciting my poem "Hog Roast" in Flint, Michigan, a man in the audience squealed like a pig. I would have been more bothered, but until I sat down and friends told me otherwise I thought it was machinery malfunctioning. The next reader was Philip Levine.

Within minutes after Levine began reading his poetry the heckler shouted "negative space." After the second shout, Levine stopped reading. His anger was something you could feel — as if the air held thistles. It sounds comical now, but at the time it occurred to me that I might be witnessing the first poetry reading I'd been part of with a potential for violence.

Levine started talking. Here's what he said (warning: rough paraphrase): "I've met this man in Cincinnati, I've met this man in Kansas City, I've met this man in Ottawa, I've met this man in Cleveland." After a long catalogue of meeting sites, Levine said something on the order of "And God bless this man."

By the time Levine finished, the audience was not only filled with admiration for him but overwhelmed with pity for the heckler.

Which brings me to "Animals Are Passing From Our Lives," which Levine read that night — and during which no one dared to squeal. Long before that reading in Flint, I loved the little pig who speaks in that poem. I have loved that pig not just because I grew up on a farm and spent considerable time from the age of three upwards with pigs. ("A hog can strip the skin off a horse" — one of my mother's unheeded warnings.) I have loved that pig for his attitude: freedom of mind unto death. To be doomed and yet dignified about it.

For years I've remembered the poem not by its original title, but by its final words, "No. Not this pig," words that make the entire poem ripple and coil. (The final three words title the collection in which the poem appears.) For all of Levine's focus in "Animals Are Passing From Our Lives" on a non-human animal — animals are passing from our lives, as any report of species extinction informs us — the poem is unmistakably about how humans are transformed into objects.

Readers have approached the poem in many ways, even as a statement of conflict-avoidance or resignation, although such a reading hardly seems convincing if we consider the pig's discipline and rage, even his prescience. I'm not the first to notice that the pig bears a resemblance to Bartleby ("I would prefer not to"), although maybe not a lot of people have connected the pig to Hemingway's "grace under pressure."

Plenty of animals pass through Levine's poetry, irreducible creatures, like us and not like us: a sow eats a child and is hanged like a felon. Unpredictable dogs and strange birds appear. Surely Levine himself is the title creature in "The Fox," a being "who must proclaim / not ever ever ever / to mounted ladies and their gentlemen."

Levine often locates power through the body — the body's energy as well as the waste of the body in labor that numbs and diminishes. In "Commanding Elephants" he offers the lines "Oh my body, what have you // done to me?" In "Animals Are Passing From Our Lives," it's not what the body does, but what is done to the body.

At the start, the pig declaims "It's wonderful how I jog" in a tone of triumphant self-belief, a demand that living flesh be valued. (It's wonderful, too, how the poem jogs among its precise and brutal images.) Even if the pig compares his own backside to "oiled parts," the pig is insistently not an object to himself. In essence, he gives us a guided tour of his body — and of his horribly realistic dreams. Soon we're up in the pig's nostrils. Next we internalize his imagination of how human fingers (themselves plump and piggish) will enter his body, his intestines yanked out like "a hankie," in a moment that resembles a sickening magic act. By then, the rhythmic pressure we experience comes in part from nursery rhymes, those most potent linguistic forms. "I'm to market" begins the second stanza, an echo of "This little pig went to market" and of "To market / to market / to buy a fat pig / home again / home again / jiggedy jig" — echoing the pig's rhythmic jogging.

Finally, our elegant pig, our defiant pig, our pig capable of withering disdain refuses to engage in useless panic before he's butchered. *No. Not this pig.*

Dignity takes many forms, as does revolt. Levine's pig won't put on a show of wild flailing terror for anyone — which amounts to an aesthetic of sorts for the poet himself in his unswerving commitment to a non-flamboyant poetry that doesn't reduce its subjects but that questions subjection itself.

"Animals Are Passing from Our Lives" is followed in *Not This Pig* by "Baby Villon." In the latter poem, Levine stages an imaginary meeting between his speaker and the legendary brawler and thieving poet, the irrepressible François Villon. "Baby Villon" ends:

No bigger than a girl, he holds my shoulders,
Kisses my lips, his eyes still open,
My imaginary brother, my cousin,
Myself made otherwise by all his pain.

Making "otherwise" has defined much of Levine's career. Repeatedly, he chooses to imagine what inhabiting another body and another fate feels like. He must have learned at an early age what misery felt like and, although his circumstances changed, he didn't forget.

Years ago, in Flint, it was dark in the auditorium. I never saw the heckler's face. In the end, always on the side of the rebels, Levine let the heckler keep his dignity. Just think of what Levine might have said, given his arsenal. At any rate, the heckler didn't heckle again — not for the rest of that night.

THEY FEED THEY LION

Out of burlap sacks, out of bearing butter,
Out of black bean and wet slate bread,
Out of the acids of rage, the candor of tar,
Out of creosote, gasoline, drive shafts, wooden dollies,
They Lion grow.

Out of the gray hills
Of industrial barns, out of rain, out of bus ride,
West Virginia to Kiss My Ass, out of buried aunties,
Mothers hardening like pounded stumps, out of stumps,
Out of the bones' need to sharpen and the muscles' to stretch,
They Lion grow.

Earth is eating trees, fence posts,
Gutted cars, earth is calling in her little ones,
"Come home, Come home!" From pig balls,
From the ferocity of pig driven to holiness,
From the furred ear and the full jowl come
The repose of the hung belly, from the purpose
They Lion grow.

From the sweet glues of the trotters
Come the sweet kinks of the fist, from the full flower
Of the hams the thorax of caves,
From "Bow Down" come "Rise Up,"
Come they Lion from the reeds of shovels,
The grained arm that pulls the hands,
They Lion grow.

From my five arms and all my hands,
From all my white sins forgiven, they feed,
From my car passing under the stars,
They Lion, from my children inherit,
From the oak turned to a wall, they Lion,
From they sack and they belly opened
And all that was hidden burning on the oil-stained earth
They feed they Lion and he comes.

LIONIZING FURY

Anger becomes art, at least in Philip Levine's case, and "They Feed They Lion" is a magisterial celebration of rage, a raging celebration. The poem is so rhetorically charged, so rhythmically driven, that it is, in a stylistic sense, a verbal machine unlike any other in Levine's work. But in another thematic sense, it is the culmination of Levine's early work, which begins in silence and failure (the desperate silence of "Silent in America," the failure of poets who don't write in "My Poets"). Levine's first books — from *On the Edge* (1963) to *They Feed They Lion* (1972) — obsessively return to the subject of voicelessness. As his work developed, he increasingly insisted on the defiant transformation of blankness into language, refusing to be quieted. The theme of the necessity of violently breaking silence peaks in a poem that celebrates the racial rebellion — the social insurrection — of the Detroit riots of 1967. The oppressed speak through wildly destructive action.

Levine has said that he wrote "They Feed They Lion" when he returned to Detroit just after the riots to see what had happened to his hometown. There's a telling reference to his driving around the city, which is the actual backdrop of the poem — a white man passing through black neighborhoods ("From all my white sins forgiven, they feed, / From my car passing under the stars"). Here is his story of how he came up with the title, a startling linguistic formula waiting to be remembered and deployed:

I was working alongside a guy in Detroit — a black guy named Eugene — when I was probably about twenty-four. He was a somewhat older guy, and we were sorting universal joints, which are part of the drive-shaft of a car. The guy who owned the place had bought used ones, and we were supposed to sort the ones that could be rebuilt and made into usable replacement parts from the ones that were too badly damaged. So we spread them out on the concrete floor, and we were looking at them carefully, because we were the guys who'd then do

the job of rebuilding them. We had two sacks that we were putting them in — burlap sacks — and at one point Eugene held up a sack, and on it were the words “Detroit Municipal Zoo.” And he laughed and said, “They feed they lion they meal in they sacks.”

This memory also jumpstarts the action and the poet takes the joke — using the detritus of junked autos as food for the wild animals of Detroit — and transforms it into the metaphor that drives the poem:

Out of burlap sacks, out of bearing butter,
Out of black bean and wet slate bread,
Out of the acids of rage, the candor of tar,
Out of creosote, gasoline, drive shafts, wooden dollies,
They Lion grow.

Levine ingeniously marshals the genius of the black vernacular — has any other white poet used it so appropriately? — to summon up the Great Migration, the movement of millions of African Americans from the rural South to the industrializing North. A city such as Detroit was completely transformed between, say, 1900 and 1940, when the population of Wayne County, Michigan, grew from around three-hundred and fifty thousand to more than two million. By 1967, blacks represented more than forty percent of Detroit’s overall population. Here is Levine’s dramatic condensation, which mixes the journey North with the growing of a rough beast, a mythical Lion, slouching not towards Bethlehem, as in Yeats’ “The Second Coming,” but towards a gritty Midwestern city, which would suffer its own apocalypse. The poem rides the vernacular and yet the long lines — and the rhetorical repetition of the phrase “Out of” — move the language beyond speech into the realm of prophecy:

Out of the gray hills
Of industrial barns, out of rain, out of bus ride,
West Virginia to Kiss My Ass, out of buried aunties,

Mothers hardening like pounded stumps, out of stumps,
Out of the bones' need to sharpen and the muscles' to stretch,
They Lion grow.

Levine recognizes the centrality of the pig to black culture, especially southern black culture, and he uses this most despised of animals to create the movement toward a furious sacrifice, a near-sacred reckoning. The riots began when the police raided an after-hours bar or "blind pig." Formally, the lengthening stanzas enact the feeling that something violent is ominously building, a Lion (one recognizes it as the most majestic of African animals) is growing. Paul Zweig once noted that this Lion "is a mockery of St. Mark's biblical lion" because "when it comes, man and earth will be devoured by one hunger." The words "Out of" are now replaced by phrases beginning with the word "From." Something is growing that cannot be stopped.

Earth is eating trees, fence posts,
Gutted cars, earth is calling in her little ones,
"Come home, come home!" From pig balls,
From the ferocity of pig driven to holiness,
From the furred ear and the full jowl come
The repose of the hung belly, from the purpose
They Lion grow.

From the sweet glues of the trotters
Come the sweet kinks of the fist, from the full flower
Of the hams the thorax of caves,
From "Bow Down" come "Rise Up,"
Come they Lion from the reeds of shovels,
The grained arm that pulls the hands,
They Lion grow.

Levine fuses a host of influences into a daring new whole in "They Feed They Lion," which moves with a sense of relentless pressure. The splendid twists and turns of colloquial black speech marry the incantatory rhythms of the biblical prophets, the anaphora of Christopher Smart's "Jubilate Agno" and Walt

Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," the wildly inventive mixed diction of John Berryman and Dylan Thomas (the inversion "From my five arms and all my hands" comes directly from Thomas' playbook). The poem inventively uses the word "Lion" as both noun (as in "the Lion") and verb (as in "to Lion"). The word "They" becomes both subject (as in "They Feed") and possessive pronoun (as in "They" or their "Lion"). This gives the poem a sinuous syntactical energy and ambiguity. Altogether it has a sweeping musical and rhetorical authority, a burning sense of "the acids of rage, the candor of tar," a psychological understanding of what motivates people to move from "Bow Down" to "Rise Up."

There are a host of religious echoes and allusions cryptically employed as this thirty-three line poem builds to its final apocalyptic reckoning and conclusion. The symbolic number resonates. The sacrifice has been laid out. The rebellion has come, the meek have inherited the earth, such as it is in the industrial Midwest, and a terrible reckoning has come to America.

From my five arms and all my hands,
From all my white sins forgiven, they feed,
From my car passing under the stars,
They Lion, from my children inherit,
From the oak turned to a wall, they Lion,
From they sack and they belly opened
And all that was hidden burning on the oil-stained earth
They feed they Lion and he comes.

LET ME BEGIN AGAIN

Let me begin again as a speck
of dust caught in the night winds
sweeping out to sea. Let me begin
this time knowing the world is
salt water and dark clouds, the world
is grinding and sighing all night, and dawn
comes slowly and changes nothing. Let
me go back to land after a lifetime
of going nowhere. This time lodged
in the feathers of some scavenging gull
white above the black ship that docks
and broods upon the oily waters of
your harbor. This leaking freighter
has brought a hold full of hayforks
from Spain, great jeroboams of dark
Algerian wine and quill pens that can't
write English. The sailors have stumbled
off toward the bars or the bright houses.
The captain closes his log and falls asleep.
1/10'28. Tonight I shall enter my life
after being at sea for ages, quietly,
in a hospital named for an automobile.
The one child of millions of children
who has flown alone by the stars
above the black wastes of moonless waters
that stretched forever, who has turned
golden in the full sun of a new day.
A tiny wise child who this time will love
his life because it is like no other.

NICE WORK IF YOU CAN GET IT

Thirty years ago, when I was a student of Philip Levine's at Fresno State, he'd often say to us that we had more interesting things in our pockets than in our poems. And he was right. That lint, loose tobacco, and couple of cents were infinitely more evocative than anything in our poems, and more useful. A similarly effective pedagogical method of Levine's was to shake our poems above his desk — a lab table, with sink: poetry workshops at Fresno State were held in the agriculture building — and listen for the "real stuff," the good stuff, for *any* stuff to fall out of them. These were the best lessons in the value of concrete language and the importance of specificity, image, and detail to poetry that I've ever learned, and I use them with my own students and, secretly but without fail, on my own poems to this day.

When I shake out a Philip Levine poem I find, as all readers do, working men and women and the ruined landscapes they inhabit in an accessible free verse lyrical narrative Levine has become justly famous for. I find the gutsy, plainspoken, unmistakably Philip Levine song that's been critically acclaimed, savagely dismissed, and roundly awarded and rewarded. But I also find the visionary and ecstatic, the sometimes exotic and surreal, the inconsolable and restlessly spiritual cast across variously arranged lines of impeccably worked and highly musical sentences. It's this combination of gorgeousness and grit, I think, this heady lyricism with its calloused hands, that's made Levine the shaping influence he is on the poetry of our time.

Levine's poem "Let Me Begin Again," from the 1979 collection *7 Years from Somewhere*, serves as an example of the kind of poem I found especially instructive as a young poet. It was originally published in *The New Yorker* in 1978. I was a junior at Fresno State; Phil was exactly the age I am now. I didn't subscribe to *The New Yorker* and didn't personally know anybody at the time who did, but I worked at Fresno State's library, in Reference, one area over from Periodicals, and kept an eye out for incoming literary journals in the obsessive way only an aspiring poet can. I remember encountering the poem for the first time there in that large, oppressively

uninspiring block of room. Soon to turn twenty, I was already more than ready to begin again, and the poem's opening invocation could have been uttered by my heart: "Let me begin again as a speck / of dust caught in the night winds / sweeping out to sea."

In summer, when temperatures in the San Joaquin Valley climbed well over the century mark, Fresnoans who could afford to, and many of those who couldn't, made pilgrimages to the Pacific, just to breathe something other than dust and pesticides. The sight of the ocean and the shock of cold and sea spray were a reprieve. More liberating was to find Levine's insistent words: only mono- or double-syllable words from lines one to ten; and, throughout, hypnotic combinations of anapests, dactyls, and spondees. The poem's first sentence is both simple and alliteratively pleasing; the second sentence builds from the first a more complex syntax, a more complex music. Levine's lines range from eight to thirteen syllables in this poem, and the sentences containing them are greatly varied in length and structure. Nearly half are not, in fact, full sentences, but fragments meant to expand and modify previous complete sentences: "This time lodged" (line 9) is a long fragment covering the space of four lines. Another long fragment — "The one child of millions of children" — serves as the poem's penultimate, transformative moment. And the quirky non-sentence of the date — of the captain's log entry? of the child's birth? of Levine's birth, it turns out — 1/10'28, opens perhaps one of the most rhythmically innovative free verse lines of the late 20th century, replete with thirteen syllables, three caesuras, and scansion that to my ear sounds like / / / x / x / x x / x x /.

"Let Me Begin Again" is a poem steeped in darkness, a night flight. Even the "hold full of hayforks / from Spain" and "jeroboams of dark / Algerian wine and quill pens that can't / write English" are darkneses holding a dark that holds the dark. "The captain closes his log and falls asleep." Writing is referenced here, as are rebirth and travel. There's a Homeric intensity in the details, atmosphere, and rhythms, and surely something epic and oracular — following, in typical Levine fashion, the wise-guy humor of "Tonight I shall enter my life / after being at sea for

ages, quietly, / in a hospital named for an automobile" — in the chosen one flying alone in the dark until he turns golden, loving "his life because it is like no other."

7 Years from Somewhere, Levine's sixth full-length collection, is full of poems of rebirth, or rather, its possibility and impossibility, a conflict Levine works out over a lifetime of writing. But in this book his perspective is decidedly middle-aged. *Home* is a word that recurs throughout; memories of childhood and elegies for the dead are abundant; and Levine's tone, while defiant as ever, is softened here by a fatherly tenderness, most notably in poems such as "Ricky," "Francisco, I'll Bring You Red Carnations," "Your Life," "Snow," and, arguably the book's masterpiece, "You Can Have It."

The cover of the book features a photograph of the grave of one of the left-wing anarchists of the Spanish Civil War whom Levine frequently references in his poems. In "Francisco, I'll Bring You Red Carnations," for example, Levine loosely quotes Buenaventura Durruti from a 1936 interview, in which he says, "we carry a new world, here, in our hearts." "Let Me Begin Again" possesses the spirit of Durruti's words. Levine's insignificant speck of dust traverses the world and enters into a life that promises to be new, to be heartfelt, unique, wise, and brightly lit. A romantic vision? Yes. Sentimental? Hardly. For the true life of this child, of most children, Levine implies, is something else indeed. Nevertheless, without the hopefulness of Durruti's belief, re-stated by Levine in so many of his poems, the faithful spirit cannot even begin to dream of moving forward.

While I didn't know it then, other poets besides Levine had written about work, about class, about opportunities missed and young lives lost. But in those days it was true for the majority of Levine's Fresno State students that Poetry lived on the East Coast, if not in England, and we lived on the not-quite-West Coast. Crappy luck. Except Levine lived among us, too, and he had lived there in Detroit, he had lived there in Barcelona, and he continued to live there in his poems. I'm not making too much of this when I claim that what the work did was stir our spirits out from under the crush and devastation of the ordinary, ugly, and

poor, and because of that, poetry became possible for us. Because of Levine's subject matter, his prosody, his humor, his anger, his allegiances to and alliances with the political and social underclass, his students not only found a way to speak, but were reassured of their right to. The courage and confidence we'd been in danger of losing — to observe the world, criticize it, mourn it, praise it, analyze it, create and recreate it — were restored. And it became clear that if we chose to, and worked very hard, we might just make poets of ourselves, as Philip Levine had. Literature that had once seemed largely inaccessible or irrelevant to me and my peers seemed suddenly necessary — ours for the taking and, most astonishingly, ours to make.

Alas, there is no poet or teacher good enough to teach someone how to survive a life of poetry, how to stay surprise-able, how to love your life enough and be able to sustain yourself on work and sometimes on the work alone. But poems like "Let Me Begin Again" prepared me to learn those things, and they continue to instruct me in ways poetic and practical every day. As a teacher myself now at a state institution, teaching poetry to many students who are first in their families to attend college, I see again and again the connection most of them make with Levine poems, the instantaneous recognition, a where-have-you-been-all-my-life wonder, though they know nothing of his politics or background, and more often than not refer to him as Philip LeVine (long i). When this love match happens, as it does at least once or twice a year, I'm reminded of a story I heard many years ago from someone who taught *Great Expectations* to a group of urban, academically and financially disadvantaged high school kids. He'd been amazed to see the students engage so completely with a long book by a white English author of the 19th century, and when he asked the students, point-blank, what it was they liked about the novel, one of them answered, "Anyone who's been despised can understand this book."

Just as Dickens offers Pip a do-over, so Levine offers his reader a do-over in "Let Me Begin Again." No guarantees, just opportunity. We make of it what we can. Turns out, that task is our hardest work yet.

THE FOX

I think I must have lived
once before, not as a man or woman
but as a small quick fox pursued
through fields of grass and grain
by ladies and gentlemen on horseback.
This would explain my nose
and the small tufts of hair
that rise from the base of my spine.
It would explain why I am
so seldom invited out to dinner
and when I am I am never
invited back. It would explain
my loathing for those on horseback
in Central Park and how I can
so easily curse them and challenge
the men to fight and why no matter
how big they are or how young
they refuse to dismount,
for at such times, rock in hand,
I must seem demented.
My anger is sudden and total,
for I am a man to whom anger
usually comes slowly, spreading
like a fever along my shoulders
and back and turning my stomach
to a stone, but this fox anger
is lyrical and complete, as I stand
in the pathway shouting and refusing
to budge, feeling the dignity
of a small creature menaced
by the many and larger. Yes,
I must have been that unseen fox
whose breath sears the thick bushes
and whose eyes burn like opals
in the darkness, who humps

and shits gleefully in the horsepath
softened by moonlight and goes on
feeling the steady measured beat
of his fox heart like a wordless
delicate song, and the quick forepaws
choosing the way unerringly
and the thick furred body following
while the tail flows upward,
too beautiful a plume for anyone
except a creature who must proclaim
not ever ever ever
to mounted ladies and their gentlemen.

A VISION

"By the imagination alone can men know foxes."

— John Masefield, 1919

Several years ago on a perfectly autumnal Southern morning, I opened my car door and stepped out into the driveway of a home in Nashville, Tennessee. I stood less than a football field's distance from an interstate highway. Nevertheless, a flash of fleet red imagery broke cover from a bank of shrubbery beside the house and streaked past, just barely disturbing the edge of my vision. All I could perceive was a perfectly straight, swiftly-moving bar of auburn gold. It was traveling, unaccountably, in some manner that made it appear suspended slightly in the air, completely parallel to the ground below. The back end of the auburn bar terminated in a mirage-like, feathery appendage. The physics of the thing's movement seemed impossible, its speed fantastical. Then the flash was gone, and I was not even sure I had actually seen it.

In something of a daze, I turned to my friend who had just emerged from his house with a steaming cup of coffee in his hand. Too late, his eyes streamed across the lawn. "That was our fox," he said. "Amazing sight, isn't it?"

One of the pleasures of being a poet is that of a well-stocked literary imagination. At moments when the mind is strained with either pain or pleasure, it can be a relief to rest upon lines written by earlier generations. Now, my mind was addled. I had never seen a fox before. I could not recall ever wishing to see a fox, nor had I ever had a particular interest in the real life creature or the sly character Reynard of fables and myths. Therefore, in the discombobulated post-visionary moments of such a strange and powerful encounter, I welcomed the intrusion of a few lines from John Masefield's long narrative poem, "Reynard the Fox":

Like a rocket shot to a ship ashore
The lean red bolt of his body tore...

That seemed exactly right, and the fragment was calming enough to allow me to go about the rest of my day. As I moved through the hours, the image of the real-life fox I had seen remained fixed and marvelous. I could not dislodge its presence in my mind, or dilute its intensity. I saw again and again its unearthly swiftness, its burnished, fleeing hue. I kept coming back to Masefield for help with this fox, but something about his poem (which I reread later that day), ultimately failed to satisfy. A lengthy, Chaucerian-influenced narrative, it focuses mainly on the *dramatis personae* of the hunt, a kind of sociological treatise on the culture of fox-hunting, and details of life in the post-Victorian English countryside. The poem is less about the creature of the fox, itself, than it is about those gentle folk of leisure who pursue him to the death for their pleasure. It is only in the final sections of the poem that Masefield turns his attention to the fox: a completely personified Reynard. And though, in fact, the fox ultimately eludes the hunters (in this poem, at least), he remains an iconic loser. In the American vernacular, we might call Masefield's fox "a loser with a capital L." He is reconciled to his fate as prey, awed by the superiority of humans who pursue him on horseback, armed with hound packs and firearms, and accepting of the unchangeable, repetitive structures of a life which must always be lived in response to pressures from above. Masefield's fox, for all his beauty and cleverness, was destined to life in the margins, a class-bound creature that accepted his inferior place in the scheme of things.

Intuitively, I felt that this could not be the fox running through the heart of Nashville, Tennessee, in 2006. But it was not until I found myself clogged in traffic outside the university hospital just as day shift ended, surrounded by exhausted people in crumpled polyester uniforms pointing their second-hand minivans and beat-up pickups toward home, that I recognized my fox as the eponymous creature of Philip Levine's poem. The fox I had seen was surely a trans-Atlantic, New World, post-colonial creature, "lyrical and complete" in itself, autonomous and accountable to no one, a "wordless / delicate song" of perfectly encapsulated, totally liberated being. I imagined I had glimpsed him

coming off shift, just like the exhausted folks idling in their vehicles beside me. None of them wanted anything more than a beer, or a breakfast, a soft bed, or sex. "You can have it," I now imagined the fox quoting from another Levine poem, as it fled my field of vision. "You can have it."

Masefield prefaced his metrically-plodding homage to the English hunt with a lengthy essay that described his lifelong interest in fox-hunting, recounting the romantic influence of early years in the countryside surrounded by kennels of hounds and scarlet-coated hunters. While claiming a kind of popular appeal for the sport, he also admits, obliquely, its dependence on the British class system of his era, with its vast tracts of privately held land, and its cooperative cadre of accommodating landowners who were willing to dismantle their stiles and fences during fox season to enhance the recreational pleasure of their social betters. By 1919, when Masefield wrote his poem, that system, of course, was beginning to break down. Masefield bemoaned the "small holdings system" whereby modest landowners farmed single acres. Enclosed with barbed wire, these small farms threatened the leisure-class pursuit of pleasure. The continued increase of small farms, Masefield worried, would contribute to the decline of fox-hunting by causing "the country to become more rigidly enclosed than at present."

As far as I know, Philip Levine has not written specifically about "The Fox." If he did, he certainly would not claim — as I am claiming — that only he could have given us this quintessentially American fox, transformed from the beleaguered English creature that fears those who pursue him and that acknowledges permanent superiority of Others in the scheme of things, to the New World fox who stands his ground, rather than fleeing. While Masefield's hunters gallop through an historical landscape which accommodates itself to their desire, Levine's thoroughly American, would-be foxhunters enjoy no such privilege. In the New World republic where his poem takes place, those who would assume the trappings of Old World entitlements find themselves constrained. Literally, the poem contains the pretentious "mounted ladies and their gentlemen" within the free-to-all, civic space

of a public park in the middle of a city. Here, while they are as free as all their fellow citizens to enact their fantasies of a different kind of life, they will find no accommodating lower classes willing to remove barriers that would impede their pleasure. And any fox they might encounter will also refuse to play his part in their game:

... I stand
In the pathway shouting and refusing
To budge, feeling the dignity
Of the small creature menaced by the many and larger.

While Masfield's fox runs for its life in the trivial margins of privileged lives, Levine's fox plants itself squarely in the center of an unjust narrative. With a "rock in hand," and "demented" in its anger, Levine's fox challenges the authority of larger, human creatures, mounted high in the air on the backs of horses, and demolishes the class-inflected fantasies of would-be "ladies and gentlemen." Long before the term gained its current cachet, Levine wrote a poetry of identity politics. "The Fox" may be the most purely metaphorical of his many poems that have contributed to American literature a cast of archetypal American working people whose ferocity and defiance have not obscured for him their particular brand of spiritual beauty. "The Fox" is at the center of those politics. Here, we see a maligned literary character representing not only a reinvention of itself, but many of the famous characters of Levine's poems as well. The fox embodies all of Levine's characters who are on the run, pursued, looking for a way out, for a safe place to hide, or merely for somewhere to lie down without anxiety: the obstreperous drunk Stash from the Cadillac plant, the young brother destroying his youthful beauty in brutal factory work, and even somehow Esther Levine, his mother. When he imagines her, in "The Mercy," as a nine-year-old, immigrating alone to America in 1913 — trying to eat an unpeeled banana, perplexed by the spicy tartness of the juice of an orange, each as strange to her tastebuds as the feel of the foreign words in her mouth — we see a child adrift in difficulty who

remains, nevertheless, undefeated in hope and courage. Somehow, all of the struggling characters in Levine's poems show us how to say yes to life by saying "not ever ever ever" to the worldly forces that would, that could defeat the fierce desire of every person on the planet not just to live, but to thrive.

This is a good season during which to re-read Philip Levine's "The Fox." His preoccupation with the inner and outer lives of American workers has been one of his most identifiable characteristics as a poet. As his readers know, it is honestly earned from real life experience in Detroit during the 1930s and 1940s. Now, sixty years later, we are watching the prolonged, shuddering death of Detroit's great undertaking, the American automobile industry. While the wannabe "ladies and gentlemen" of our society pile up their billions and lock themselves inside gated communities and private jets, the rest of us try to manage the impact of the shrinking, desiccating calamities of our own lives, and those of so many others. Of course, the gentlefolk must dismount eventually. And when they do, I retain my hope that our American brothers and sisters in the working class will not face them clothed in the garments of the fleet-footed but resigned, class-bound fox in Masefield's poem. What I'm hoping for instead is Philip Levine's ugly American fox who will "refus[e] to budge," who will "challenge" and "curse them," who will even "shit gleefully" in the path of the oppressors, and who will go on "proclaim[ing] / not ever ever ever" to the forces that would quell them.

THE TWO

When he gets off work at Packard, they meet outside a diner on Grand Boulevard. He's tired, a bit depressed, and smelling the exhaustion on his own breath, he kisses her carefully on her left cheek. Early April, and the weather has not decided if this is spring, winter, or what. The two gaze upwards at the sky which gives nothing away: the low clouds break here and there and let in tiny slices of a pure blue heaven. The day is like us, she thinks; it hasn't decided what to become. The traffic light at Linwood goes from red to green and the trucks start up, so that when he says, "Would you like to eat?" she hears a jumble of words that mean nothing, though spiced with things she cannot believe, "wooden Jew" and "lucky meat." He's been up late, she thinks, he's tired of the job, perhaps tired of their morning meetings, but when he bows from the waist and holds the door open for her to enter the diner, and the thick odor of bacon frying and new potatoes greets them both, and taking heart she enters to peer through the thick cloud of tobacco smoke to see if "their booth" is available.

F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote that there were no second acts in America, but he knew neither this man nor this woman and no one else like them unless he stayed late at the office to test his famous one liner, "We keep you clean in Muscatine," on the woman emptying his waste basket. Fitzgerald never wrote with someone present, except for this woman in a gray uniform whose comings and goings went unnoticed even on those December evenings she worked late while the snow fell silently

on the window sills and the new fluorescent lights
blinked on and off. Get back to the two, you say.
Not who ordered poached eggs, who ordered
only toast and coffee, who shared the bacon
with the other, but what became of the two
when this poem ended, whose arms held whom,
who first said "I love you" and truly meant it,
and who misunderstood the words, so longed
for, and yet still so unexpected, and began
suddenly to scream and curse until the waitress
asked them both to leave. The Packard plant closed
years before I left Detroit, the diner was burned
to the ground in '67, two years before my oldest son
fled to Sweden to escape the American dream.
"And the lovers?" you ask. I wrote nothing about lovers.
Take a look. Clouds, trucks, traffic lights, a diner, work,
a wooden shoe, East Moline, poached eggs, the perfume
of frying bacon, the chaos of language, the spices
of spent breath after eight hours of night work.
Can you hear all I feared and never dared to write?
Why the two are more real than either you or me,
why I never returned to keep them in my life,
how little I now mean to myself or anyone else,
what any of this could mean, where you found
the patience to endure these truths and confessions?

WRINGING THE NECK OF ELOQUENCE

There are two kinds of people in this world: those who really believe that Phil Levine is old, and those of us who know better, and have the sneaky feeling that this whole “old” thing is a lot like participating in a mass delusion. Phil Levine isn’t old — this is just another conspiracy of the Gregorian calendar, maybe even the Aztec calendar, against a man whose youthfulness makes everybody feel younger, smarter, funnier, more happily irreverent just by being in the same room.

So rather than talk about how old Phil is, I want to say a word about how old Phil isn’t: in his life and work, he refuses to be a victim of what you might call “senior porn,” in which younger people in their perverse, elderly way long to hear him start talking in wisdom speak, and nodding sagely as he pontificates on the most silly things like “the vastness of the imagination” or “the truth of the heart and the heart’s affections” and all the rest of the artsy, pious claptrap that his work has always delighted in overturning, eviscerating, and hanging out to dry.

In fact, the older Phil gets in calendar time, the younger he gets in poetry time — in poetry time, Phil is one of the most vitally youthful, consistently inventive poets alive, both in his language and in his wonderfully weird way of putting a poem together so that it defeats the expectations of both lyric and narrative, and yet manages to tell a story that Kafka would delight in, and tell it in language that Keats and Clare, Crane and Stevens would immediately recognize as the “real thing strange,” “the necessary and needful thing,” “the fine excess” of an art that is just a little bit out of its mind.

His poem “The Two,” from his latest book *Breath*, beautifully exemplifies this youthful overflow — but without forsaking his skeptical intelligence in all its passionate and precise and exacting knowledge of love, class striving, and the fiercely funny and sad consequences of following what used to be called “the American dream.” It’s a poem that I don’t entirely understand, which is why I keep reading it. There should be a sign posted over the doorway of it that says: Read At Your Own Risk and Abandon All Platitudes Ye Who Enter Here.

Is this a love poem, an anti-love poem, a gnomic political poem whose politics keep eluding what Randall Jarrell once called “the monumental certainties that go perpetually by perpetually on time”? Is it a poem that talks about the insufficiency of language while doing a brilliant job of keeping the language in not so much a “useful” state of repair as, in Ed Dorn’s words, “an interesting state of repair”? The comic and unsettling way the couple keep mishearing one another is a brilliant condensation of the poem’s deliberate ambiguities: that the reader continually gets tripped up by the speaker’s refusal to “stick to the subject” — working people, diners, love in diners, a whole set of clichéd tropes that the poem brushes aside — serves as a subtle slap to the reader and his cocksure assumptions about what an urban pastoral, “Phil Levine” poem ought to deliver.

In fact, the real provocation in this poem is the speaker’s relationship with the reader — yes, the poet cares about the couple, but there’s an impatience too with the whole mode of dramatic lyric and its insistence on a stable point of view: the poet seems fed up with what “we” want in our sentimental projections, even as he provides us with a comic, but deeply empathetic portrait of the two — only to demolish the conventions that underwrite that portrait. Hence the rude intrusion on the two of two alter-egos for the poet, the cleaning woman and Fitzgerald writing his advertising jingle. On the one hand, the poet’s class allegiances are with the cleaning woman, and on the other, he’s the artist aloof from his materials. And as for mooning over the two by filling in their story, the speaker is way too wisened-up and quirky a storyteller to ever give us what would be the poetic equivalent of keeping “it clean / in Muscatine” — a sort of high-artsy canned jingle orchestrated with factory whistles and the like.

Instead, what Levine gives us is far more provisional, even contradictory. The reader is lulled by the speaker into expecting sequential narrative, and instead we get fractured bits of information and sense impressions: “Clouds, trucks, traffic lights, a diner, work, / a wooden shoe...” — now just where did that wooden shoe come from (this is the first time the speaker has singled it out)? — and then an abstraction: “the chaos of language.”

All of these feints and darts away from the two keep bringing back the dynamic between poet and reader as we scramble to keep up with that pronominally indeterminate, shapeshifting "you." Are we, as readers, the collective "you"? Is there someone in the wings the "you" might refer to?

These questions of authorial reliability start to call into question what seemed to be the point of the shrewd comedy and social acuteness of observation that marks the first half of the poem: that the two are in fact a species of thinly veiled autobiography. But the poet's desire to take a crowbar to the half-finished edifice of the tale of the two by suddenly shifting the poem's focus to the historical context of their meeting — the diner burning down in 1967, his son fleeing to Sweden to escape the Vietnam War — impeaches the narrator's trustworthiness so that we regard him — but also ourselves — in a new light: the light of the third degree, in which suddenly both we and the speaker of the poem are on trial. And you can forget about the epiphanic consolations we might have expected from such an *echt*-working class scenario. The poem repudiates all such treacle and sentimental maneuvering.

Instead, it delivers to us a narrator who, like Gogol in "The Overcoat," is a confrontational live wire where the reader is concerned, a passionate advocate as well as skeptic in speaking about the two, and a calculatedly loose cannon when it comes to observing poetic conventions. The poet's refusal to stay "on message" and his penchant for digression takes a ferociously challenging turn at the end. The radically alienated impatience the poet expresses with his own fictions underscores the poet's recognition that succumbing to the couple's story is merely a way of evading the real issue.

And that issue isn't simply the difficulty of connecting with others, as in the case of the couple, or even in connecting with readers, as in the poet's case; it's also the difficulty the poet is experiencing, as his poem unfolds, in being able to connect with his own rapidly revising sense of self, and that self's conception of how poetry both expresses and suppresses identity. At the end of the poem, the speaker's sense of poetic and personal worthlessness reminds me of Yeats's self-denunciation in "The Circus Ani-

mals' Desertion." But while Yeats finds a way to stay inside the comfort zone of his own rhetoric — to lie down "where all the ladders start / In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart" isn't exactly slumming it linguistically — Levine wrings the neck of his own eloquence. "The spices / of spent breath" are fanned away by the brilliantly flat and anti-poetical question that the poet asks himself and us: where we got the patience for all these truths and confessions, these literary conventions, when in fact the real problem is a sense of despair about one's own lack of meaning, either as a poet or a person.

But the indictment doesn't stop there. The poet hints that the real confession hasn't even begun. There's something even more offensive to the speaker (and possibly to us, his readers) that he blurts out at the end — his own inability to stop whoring after meaning...and needing us to watch him as he goes at it.

The strange originality and comic genius of this perception show that Levine still thinks of himself as a man and poet in the making, therefore with a future, whose life's work is still a stepping stone and not a tombstone, and who gleefully disdains to start spouting the wisdom speak of *eminence gris-dom*. *Fuh-get-about-it*, is what Levine says in this poem, while writing one of the best love poems *cum* self-elegies I've ever read. What other poet of any age can be trusted to take us by the hand, and consistently delight us by how slippery and exhilaratingly unreliable that grip truly is? Not the languagey, verbal sleight-of-handers, still less the earnest, owlsh signifiers. And as the question at the end of the poem implies, this poem and this poet are still looking toward the future — not for answers, darling, but for further chances at provocation! May he continue to indict, excite, and enflame us for a long while yet and never ever settle down.

CALL IT MUSIC

Some days I catch a rhythm, almost a song
in my own breath. I'm alone here
in Brooklyn, late morning, the sky
above the St. George Hotel clear, clear
for New York, that is. The radio playing
Bird Flight, Parker in his California
tragic voice fifty years ago, his faltering
"Lover Man" just before he crashed into chaos.
I would guess that outside the recording studio
in Burbank the sun was high above the jacarandas,
it was late March, the worst of yesterday's rain
had come and gone, the sky was washed. Bird
could have seen for miles if he'd looked, but what
he saw was so foreign he clenched his eyes,
shook his head, and barked like a dog — just once —
and then Howard McGhee took his arm and assured him
he'd be OK. I know this because Howard told me
years later, told me that he thought Bird could
lie down in the hotel room they shared, sleep
for an hour or more, and waken as himself.
The perfect sunlight angles into my little room
above Willow Street. I listen to my breath
come and go and try to catch its curious taste,
part milk, part iron, part blood, as it passes
from me into the world. This is not me,
this is automatic, this entering and exiting,
my body's essential occupation without which
I am a thing. The whole process has a name,
a word I don't know, an elegant word not
in English or Yiddish or Spanish, a word
that means nothing to me. Howard truly believed
what he said that day when he steered
Parker into a cab and drove the silent miles
beside him while the bright world
unfurled around them: filling stations, stands
of fruits and vegetables, a kiosk selling trinkets

from Mexico and the Philippines. It was all so actual and Western, it was a new creation coming into being, like the music of Charlie Parker someone later called "glad," though that day I would have said silent, "the silent music of Charlie Parker." Howard said nothing. He paid the driver and helped Bird up two flights to their room, got his boots off, and went out to let him sleep as the afternoon entered the history of darkness. I'm not judging Howard, he did better than I could have now or then. Then I was nineteen, working on the loading docks at Railway Express, coming day by day into the damaged body of a man while I sang into the filthy air the Yiddish drinking songs my Zadie taught me before his breath failed. Now Howard is gone, eleven long years gone, the sweet voice silenced. "The subtle bridge between Eldridge and Navarro," they later wrote, all that rising passion a footnote to others. I remember in '85 walking the halls of Cass Tech, the high school where he taught after his performing days, when suddenly he took my left hand in his two hands to tell me it all worked out for the best. Maybe he'd gotten religion, maybe he knew how little time was left, maybe that day he was just worn down by my questions about Parker. To him Bird was truly Charlie Parker, a man, a silent note going out forever on the breath of genius which now I hear soaring above my own breath as this bright morning fades into afternoon. Music, I'll call it music. It's what we need as the sun staggers behind the low gray clouds blowing relentlessly in from that nameless ocean, the calm and endless one I've still to cross.

BREATH'S URGENT SONG

The final poem in Philip Levine's collection *Breath*, the poem from which Levine has drawn the title for this volume, is a stunning piece entitled "Call It Music." The opening of the poem locates Levine, "alone here / in Brooklyn" while the "radio is playing / *Bird Flight*, Parker in his California / tragic voice fifty years ago, his faltering / 'Lover Man' just before he crashed into chaos." (*Bird Flight* is a radio show devoted to Charlie Parker's music that's broadcast weekday mornings from Columbia University.) The poem proceeds with the story of Charlie Parker's famous breakdown during and after what has come to be known as the "Lover Man" recording session in Burbank, California, on July 29, 1946 (though Levine says in the poem that it was late March). Parker's sideman at the session, and friend, trumpeter Howard McGhee, himself relates to Levine ("I know this because Howard told me / years later...") part of the dramatic story as the poem unfolds into one of Levine's superbly braided narratives, weaving together the event itself, McGhee's memories, and Levine's personal reflections. McGhee takes Parker from the session to the hotel room they share, and then goes out, leaving Parker to sleep it off; McGhee believes that Parker is simply wasted, and doesn't realize that he is in the middle of a breakdown. Levine says, "I'm not judging / Howard, he did better than I could have / now or then."

Though the conclusion of the story isn't told in the poem, it is part of jazz legend. Parker keeps leaving his hotel room and going downstairs naked until at last the manager locks him in his room. During the night, Parker sets his mattress on fire with a cigarette, runs through the lobby in only his socks, and is finally taken off to the Camarillo State Mental Hospital, where he ends up staying for six months. Instead of describing Parker at the end of that night, Levine, in a *tour de force* passage, imagines what confronts Parker earlier that day, in the clear California sunlight, as he stands outside the recording studio: "... the worst of yesterday's rain / had come and gone, the sky was washed. Bird / could have seen for miles if he'd looked, but what / he saw was

so foreign he clenched his eyes, / shook his head, and barked like a dog — just once — / and then Howard McGhee took his arm and assured him / he'd be OK." In that bright light, it is a harrowing foreshadowing of the darkness about to descend upon Charlie Parker.

Other of Levine's poems have invoked jazz legends in the course of his many books, and in *Breath* itself many of Levine's musical exemplars are given nods and shout-outs: Bud Powell, Clifford Brown, Max Roach. The book itself has as its cover a remarkable photo of the trumpeter Don Cherry waiting for his train in the New York subway. "Call It Music" is nominally about Bird, and his genius, and his illness (his breakdown as a result of his heroin addiction, and his compensatory drinking when he couldn't get heroin, as was the case before the Burbank session when Parker reportedly drank a quart of whiskey just before recording began), but the poem's attendant angel is really Howard McGhee. For me, the truly breath-taking — so to speak — moment in the poem occurs when Levine meets McGhee, many years after the event: "I remember in '85 / walking the halls of Cass Tech, the high school / where he taught after his performing days, / when he suddenly took my left hand in his / two hands to tell me it all worked out / for the best." Levine considers why McGhee might have reached this estimation of his own life, adding, "Maybe he'd gotten religion, / maybe he knew how little time was left, / maybe that day he was just worn down / by my questions about Parker."

Yet let's not forget that "Call It Music" begins with this signature Levine line: "Some days I catch a rhythm, almost a song / in my own breath." This could be the *ars poetica* for all of Philip Levine's poetry. In poem after poem, over the many years of his career, we have seen Levine's belief that any poet's individual songs — the lyric voice and its verbal inscription upon the page, those simple rhythms of a poet that we might call his or her own "music," his or her own "voice" — all come from the simple source of the poet's breath, the elemental human activity that joins us to all other sentient beings on this earth. It is a sentiment and proclamation as startling and radical as anything in William Carlos Williams or François Villon.

In much the same way that every note delivered from every sax, trumpet, clarinet — any instrument that requires one's lips and one's lungs to form and project a sound — becomes a music that depends upon both the regularity and power of breath, the issuance of breath out of the body and into the world, the songs of the jazz artist and the poet are similar. Musicians deliver their music and their songs out along their breath, the stream of notes coming from their instruments. Poets offer the sounds of words, the sounds of language, the music of a poem as it escapes out of their mouths; of course, the contemporary convention is that they first inscribe those sounds as words fixed upon the page before allowing those words to sing upon the air.

But poetry is always song for Philip Levine, and breath is its own essential poetry. For Levine, breath is the most elemental aspect of any human song (with or without words), just as breath is the most elemental aspect of poetry itself. Poetry is like life itself, depending upon that most essential of all human acts — breathing, taking in and releasing one's own breath. The music by which we live our lives is the music of our own breathing. And we celebrate that the variations, in both jazz and poetry, are endless and rich. They are also personal and individual, specific and proper to each poet, each musician. In an early poem entitled "Breath," from his book *They Feed They Lion*, Levine concludes the poem by saying, "I give / the world my worn-out breath / on an old tune, I give / it all I have / and take it back again."

A little more than twenty lines into "Call It Music," Levine says, "I listen to my breath / come and go and try to catch its curious taste, / part milk, part iron, part blood, as it passes / from me into the world." These are the basic components — each delivered out upon the breath — that the poet tries to identify as being, somehow, *himself*. Yet he recognizes, "This is not me, / this is automatic, this entering and exiting, / my body's essential occupation without which / I am a thing." There we have it. The breath is not the speaker, even if it becomes the engine of the speaker. Likewise, without the essential element of breath, a person soon becomes a thing, each individual becomes a corpse. Just as, without the essential element of song, a poem becomes a dead thing as well.

In just that seemingly small moment, Levine has revealed that "Call It Music" is also a profoundly focused meditation upon mortality. Levine wants us to consider how those voices that once found their ways to us along the breaths of others will be, at the end, silenced. Look how often, in this poem with "music" in its title, the word "silent" or "silenced" appears. There is breath and song and human music, and then there is silence. Levine himself talks of coming into adulthood as being "...nineteen, working / on the loading docks at Railway Express / coming day by day into the damaged body / of a man while I sang into the filthy air / the Yiddish drinking songs my Zadie taught me / before his breath failed." Before his breath failed. Before the music of his body was silenced.

At the conclusion of "Call It Music," Levine says of Howard McGhee, "To him Bird / was truly Charlie Parker, a man, a silent note / going out forever on the breath of genius / which I now hear soaring above my own breath / as this bright morning fades into afternoon." Here is the convergence of the breath and music of the great Bird (over the airwaves of the radio) with the simple breath and breathing of the poet. The songs of the masters help us to continue; it's that simple. Their voices become the pulse that joins our own pulse, the urgency that is the measure of our own breathing. What does Levine say next? "Music, I'll call it music."

Not only to himself, a poet looking toward the mortality that lies ahead — that landscape without breath — but for all of us trying to continue living in a world with constantly eroding shores, Levine reminds us, speaking still of music, "It's what we need / as the sun staggers behind the low gray clouds / blowing relentlessly in from the nameless ocean, / the calm and endless one I've still to cross." It is with these lines that Philip Levine has chosen to conclude both his poem, "Call It Music," and the book *Breath* — or one could say, *The Book of Breath* — itself.

A WALL IN NAPLES AND NOTHING MORE

There *is* more, there's the perfect
blue of sky, there's a window, and hanging
from the sill what could be garments
of green cloth. Or perhaps they're rugs?
Where is everyone? you ask. Someone
must live in this house, for this wall
surely belongs to a house, why else
would there be washing on a day
of such perfect sky? You assume
that everyone is free to take in
the beach, to leisurely stroll the strand,
weather permitting, to leave shoes
and socks on a towel even here
in a city famous for petty crime.
For Thomas Jones, not the singer
the ladies threw knickers and room keys
at, but the Welsh painter, it was light
unblurring a surface until the light
became the object itself the way
these words or any others can't.
I'm doing my feeble best to entrance you
without a broad palette of the colors
which can make a thing like nothing
else, make it come alive with the grubby
texture all actual things possess
after the wind and weather batter them
the way all my years battered
my tongue and teeth until whatever
I say comes out sounding inaccurate,
wrong, ugly. Yes, ugly, the way a wall
becomes after whoever was meant
to be kept out or kept in has been
transformed perfectly into the light
and dust that collect constantly
on each object in a living world.

SCISSORS

A July morning of frightening heat. You take the garbage to the curb. You feel dirty, you feel maggots have invaded your slippers, you need a scalding shower, you even need a shave. At the threshold of your house a cat is waiting, a tiny black & white creature you've never seen before, perhaps a gift from destiny itself. She demands water in a china cup, cold water from the ice box & not from the tap, she demands as little chatter as possible, & her own place in the shade of the sycamore. In your mind you go over a series of appropriate names for her; none seems right until you hit upon Scissors. Later at dinner she lurks under the table; even your sons fail to mention her presence until your youngest remarks that now you're a family of six. That night in bed you hear the house creaking in the summer wind, the bamboo by the open window rises & falls, & you know the six of you have set sail for an unknown shore, some foreign land beyond the dark harbor of sleep. Little by little the house pulls farther from its anchor & further into the unknown while the waves work gently at the edges of your dreams; you've never before felt so totally yourself, so comfortable in your body. If you could speak you would say, "I am my soul." The odor of your own breath — which now is regular & sweet — tells you that one of you has gone so far there's no turning back.

GENEALOGY

One of my parents was a flame, the other a rope.
One was a tire, the other a dial tone.

In the night I'd wake to a hum and the faint
smell of burnt rubber.

One of my parents was a flag, the other a shoe.

The ideogram tattooed on my lower back
is the one for dog trying to run on ice.

One of my parents was a star already gone out,
the other a cup I carried into the night,
convinced it was fragile.

One of my parents I drank, the other I dreamed.

In the revolving door of my becoming,
one pushed from inside, one from without.
Thus, my troubled birth, my endless stammer.

One was an eyebrow, the other a wink.
How they amused each other.

One was a candle, the other a bird. I was ashamed
of not burning, embarrassed I couldn't fly.

I was a girl calling across the ice to a dog
she didn't have.

GOLDFINCH

The way you sit at the feeder, your head cocked,
beaking a seed, I think of Mandelstam
mumbling, working sounds out of their husks

And that flash, that song made in flight,
that high-pitched muttering

How fragile genius is,
anxious, always ready to leap from the sill,
always an eye out for the informer

Wings black as tilled earth
folded like hands behind your back

What did he think, little one, reciting
“the ten thick worms of his finger,” reciting
“scum of chicken-necked bosses” —

Reckless as it was, still better
than whispering in the kitchen, hiding
behind the radio’s storm?

Every spring you bring him back to my yard
as if you’ve memorized the address

And you call, you call
like a phone still ringing in a house
whose occupants have disappeared

BLACKBIRD

1

The blackbird strutting
by the river bank is you. Me —
I'm the poet in the creaky
porch swing. Every spring,
a little rustier, a few more lichen —
the glider & me too. You
always look the same age —
in death I choose the animal
to make you. This year,
your feathers shine
as black as oil.

2

When you were still alive
you were not so handsome —
except to me, of course, &
the other women, but I've forgotten
them completely — Celia, Cara,
Coral — just to name the Cs.

3

But now you are a memory
& all memory is fiction. Lies
to put it bluntly. So you are
what I say. We were a pair
of mute swans, I tell our neighbor,
the kind who mate for life.
See? I can call you swan or
blackbird & ignore how much
you hated all things avian
in life. Imagine, a grown man
afraid of walking under trees,
who liked his eggs scrambled
for fear of baby chicks.

4

& I say
the blackbird
is in love with me this spring.
Every dawn he calls me
to the river. The bright red
on his wing, my heart —
plucked by his sharp bill
from the hollow of my chest.

THE MERMAIDS SANG TO ME

And I was inside their song.
Until at last I began to think:
they're a bunch of crummy bores.

I must send them packing,
them and their aureoles.
Their eyes, shark dead,

their hides like stamp pads and arrowheads.
Odysseus should have tied them to the mast first
for the crime of singing so much

about their own lives.
Just then, the moon came out in clouds
shaped like Annabel Lee,

and the ghost of Edgar Allan Poe
bobbed in the mirror above my buffet.
If you want the truth, the ghost said,

don't look in the mirror.
The mermaids are shrinking, turning transparent,
setting up their grottos in daiquiris.

You must prefer the window to the mirror.
The window, dappled with liver spots.
(To which the mirror replied: No one is fair to me.)

MODESTY

is so boring.
Sometimes I think it is
monstrously boring.

Megalomania, on the other hand,
is even more boring,
although arrogance

is tolerable
in some people —
although none

I've met.
Sometimes
haughty disdain

is refreshing.
It says, I don't need you,
and we say,

Okay. For instance,
when your high horse ate hay
all through our lunch.

I paid the bill,
the tip too,
and backed out of the tent

where Scheherezade herself,
the patron saint of suspense,
kept on telling her stories

to her murderer-prince.
He salted a lot of virgins
with his contempt.

Poor her.
Poor purveyor of delay.
At some level

she could do nothing for him.
Neither could have
Chekhov.

FAULT

Small, she took the shape of his mistake
that shame would not admit. In dreams he crept
as wounded wolf or fox, its grey fur gashed.
Sprung trap, a black blood trail, the dark washed through

with snow. Then dawn would prize his sleep — his wife
of ten years turned away, awake, watching
the first light cloak itself in widow's weeds.
The precision of her silence, its care and grasp,

her breath a folded wing. How small of her,
he'd think, to make his breach so large.
Her eyes black shades. His stopped hands empty, closed.
Her own fault, this grief. He'd lie there, caught.

PIAZZA DI SPAGNA, 1821

During his last days Keats often held a cornelian given to him by Fanny Brawne. Joseph Severn wrote that the stone seemed "his only consolation, the only thing left him in this world clearly tangible."

A month from now, the authorities will scrape
the plaster from your walls, will burn your clothes
and books, your bed. The chair in which your friend
now sleeps, his slow breath lighting on your skin

like ice. These final mornings you still hold
the measure of your days like this cornelian,
oval as a bird's egg, in your palm,
the stone that once cooled her hand during needlework.

You shift its small round weight. Behind your eyes,
behind your memory's quiet alchemy,
all you have owned or touched already burns.
Awake, asleep, you grasp the last of it —

this warmed stone, the heart's banked coals, the passing
of breath's brief syllable to death's whole note.

AVALON

Two men are talking about death
and the weight makes the boat
ride low in the water. This idea
loose in my brain, sharp as nails,
something made to get at

the meat now that I'm ready.
The damage done by radiation
is making your teeth darken,
crumble in your mouth.
The treatment worked as

predicted but next month
you're attending a session
on Chemo Brain and you'll joke
about it in such a lame way
and apples will smell a particular

ready way when they're ripe
but then so close to over-ripe.
Such fragrant, softening orbs.
When I wake at night
I sometimes think I hear

your battered gums and neck
begin to shift open upon
the pillow's warm little stage.
You are capable of anything
even disaster, or bloom.

We are riding in a boat
among water so thick
it seems green against our oars.
Everything is just like our life
except here, we see the boat.

VERTIGO

The rivers have jumped ship.

I know my place among the missing.

Huddled in my home, the water
is cold at my feet. The wooden rafters
sink from weight. And I wait.

This is the last day for walking
the ground. The cemetery,
lithe, its stones afloat.

Here come the deadened ones,
the gone too early, too late.

A concrete bassinet with chiseled
baby inside rests outside my door.

I watch through the window.
The living make their way
to higher ground, as the dead
take their lead from the water.

I open the door, signal to a man on
a raft, his family in tow.

This is more than lightness. This
is more than mere sorrow.
This is the world saying, here,
here is your way to travel.

DAYS FALLEN INTO

The tree in the yard
spends its days fallen into.

I am called *whole*, the whimper
of a doorframe. To the east
I cannot rise, not because the sea takes

its time the way I would, tide-charted,
if I could learn the outside

of my life. Who is to say these
earned pleasures?

Who is to say pleasure is
what should be valued? This country
road, painful
with a pack of dogs.

THE MEMORY-KEEPER

The smell of pine and bacon grease,
a house in a piney tract of land, a kitchen
in the house, a stove in the kitchen,

a skillet beneath which lowly burns
a bluish flame the jets discharge when a match
is held against their sound, a sound

that travels outside in from a metered box
where a boy sits watching the radium dials
record the backward passage of time,

and time itself, the beginning of time,
and beyond the beginning a too-bright,
airless clearing where the mind lets go,

as if the past had already happened there.

GRENORA, N.D.

The man I was had neighbors;
the couple from Montana croaked.

Now in those houses the snow & cats drift.
The horses & fields grow
lonely-wild together.

So many who came with the trains
the Bowl laid flat — that was dark times,
with night for days.

Our baby girl, only girl, was stillborn
& the three boys lived & left. When I die,
someone young in town will be oldest.
It is unfair to be so young
& made so old.

People can grow lonely-wild, too,
but not the man I am; I've got a radio.

SUPERNATURE

I met my grandmother again. She was preening
in the neighbors' yard.

She is all the vermillion males in the world,
designed to be noticed today in the Pagoda Dogwood.

She sings affirmations to the tune of *always*
& of course, *what else could ever be?*

My heart is run ragged. She charges
the crow from its perch; nature is nurture.

Our roots send up wings, antlers, & fins
that nature us through the rest.

LIFE AS IT

They say Buddha called many animals to him but not the cat. Surely mythology is lax on this one, surely no one was watching on this one. After looking a while at an upward spill of incense smoke the cat disappears along a mouse-flicking path. Some Buddhists say it's important that the breath wanders in the belly. When I see a palette's paint wet and deep with colors I want to kiss it. How complex what passes for ready. The breath can do what it wants. Dragons roast meatloaves with their breaths, oxen hump in the fields, snakes unfinish circles. The cat walks through grassblades strumming.

TAG

The museum guide tells us: mid-winter a hundred years ago, a schooner from South Haven, MI, was sinking. Calmly the captain directed the crew and passengers to pack bags, wait on deck, and at the precise moment — lip of ship lowered to ice — gave the word. And they stepped onto floes, walked the way to Chicago. In the dark museum, power out, the children sweep flashlight discs, walk on floes of light. To them the story is all too believable. The sleeping curfews, the waking many. Flashlight tag on the ceiling. You're it: a statue. In vacating the schooner, not one soul was lost. Funny how childhood works, making its own missed ways.

HOT AND COLD

Lucretius knew
the middle ground
was all a man could see.

The extremes would make
a person go mad —
hypothermia,
where the snow becomes
a soft bed of down,
has claimed the best climbers.

In the heat
of a closed-up place
an old woman dies
from the same dream
that made life exciting
when she was young.

We are caught
off balance,
trying to right ourselves
when it snows in April.

Summer lasts
past late-October,
the rose puts out one more
Lincoln bloom.

We don't think to question
the laziness in our heads,
floaters rising and falling
like dance gnats
in our retinas.

We know enough
not to ask
for more than this world,
its twinned blossoms
of flower and snow —

its feverish kisses,
powdered masks,
whirling dervishes
and incestuous whims.

DOGTOOTH VIOLET

Arch-back, the fine
ridges like rib-

bones trapped.
Flesh that won't

bruise. Slight
freckled throat

(floating smoke-
smell, mauve).

Grove all shadowed,
fox-stalked.

Thin arms open:
small saint-

virgins, burning.

RAVEN

The raven pacing the white field
was there when I walked up, there still
when I walked down. I was thinking

*no one wants to be haunted, but we
go on remembering anyway.* I was so cold.
Spring has come but winter won't go —

last night it snowed so the raven
was crossing the white field all morning.
Near that place, where the road forks,

there's a house with a crack in every window.
There's a tree standing in its own scattered ruins
and a ledge where cold water slips

over stone and pools in a scooped basin.
The water tastes of iron. The snow
on the hill tastes of granite, the first violets

of blood. The raven watched me
walk up, walk down. At each step
I thought *I am a body, walking.* I thought,

don't you leave me, raven. Heard
the sound of footsteps shifting the old leaves,
the sough of wind in last year's barley.

THE FUEL

*The deluxe service includes complimentary scattering of balance
of remaining cremated remains at sea near the launch site.*

Little factory,
little ghost machine,
your sweet beating. Continue,
please. I'm hardly prepared
for the dark arms that follow.

They shoot ashes into space.
They take ashes in silver little canisters and —
no, *ashes*. Dust of *people*.
One quick up and back,
or for extra you can leave them there,
orbiting till they slow and flame against the atmosphere
and if you're lucky, one quick meteoric firestreak —
burning out in a swift cliché.
Now isn't that a kick in the —
in everything we dance for?
But I was never one for travel.

Ink dark, et cetera.
And cut to dawn.

It's easy, in April, to believe in resurrection.
Redbuds, dogwoods, daffodils.
Little insects appear and scurry.

The post-equinoctial moon hangs overhead
in that dusky periwinkle, in that sky which remains
as some kind of tender backdrop.

These are my same molecules
lit up like a Christmas tree,
all that fuel for burning.
Ash to ash, we promise,
but the puddle of goo the body becomes
is hardly as tidy as that.
All these words! All that
will not ignite. All that we keep
closer and closer to the familiar,
the alive.

O that silent,
silent flight.

GIFTS OUT OF DIRTY WEATHER

At the mall, three dead weeks before Christmas,
Half the women are old and half are ancient.

All I want under the tree is something to drink,
Bland and warm, and a little butter for my bread.

Up here, in winter where the night ice cracks
Like a knucklebone, some still have this vision:

A windblown paradise of dunes and hula trees,
Salt air and sunburnt rum. But I keep the cold

Close to me. I take it naked into my bed.
Above the fireplace, kings go down on their knees,

Rich gifts laid before the babe, when all he wants
Is his skinny mother, whose only miracle is milk.

JANUARY

At last the living room rolls back
from holy night to starless day, her
Christmas crèches packed away for
the lengthening months. Adios, tin cac-
tus, flip-up backdrop for our bladelike
sheet-tin *Jesús*, God's little razor.
Au revoir, madame outside the manger
with two cats to bless *bébé*, one black,
one white. Arrivederci, paisan',
dancing reverently with your bear.
Magi, Mary, Ox and Ass, go
up to the attic for hibernation,
when dreams shall prophesy your rescue,
a newborn life next shrunken year.

TORTUGAS

The body of Christ, oiled and dressed
in luscious robes for the feast-
day and paraded through the street,
left all the hungry host knocked out
save the toddler wriggling in her papa's
arms, reaching hands out for your breast.
Her father blushed and laughed. "Tortugas!"
he said into his girl's wide eyes —
the turtles printed on your dress
or hiding under its silk disguise?
Christ hurried past us to get nailed,
a blue note in this comedy
whose other players, safely shelled
like turtles, stare in sympathy.
When Mary nurses Christ her eyes,
downcast, disguise all she knows,
comic relief crossdressed as death.
Lie down, darling, while I praise
tortugas with my shorter breath
as long grass spins our last disguise,
before we're clocked like Aeschylus
by turtles hurtling from the blue.

I CAN'T REMEMBER

Twin loaves, or bees,
turn into butter...

the box turtle retreats to his lounge

he's a playboy

the serialization of friendly animals in print has officially begun

Sebastian the scimitar

Globes of primordial jealousy —

the organs purring
into substance

while it rains and the peonies rot...

I failed there, in nautical heaven

too manic

sailing right past the buoys of ill repute...

I confess though

like yeast rising

It's the German engineering

Do you always wear black clothes?

I take a highway

I cross under a road I once lived on

JUDY GARLAND ESPERANTO

From the moment I saw him, I fell.

Fruity without the tutti.
A clown car full of ghosts.

Ice it, heat it.
Swelling and jelling.

Ooze and booze. Muscles
and bustles.

Blowing on the flames
till they're big enough

to dance on. Rooted
and booted. Fragile

and agile. Red meat.
A long time chewing

so you don't choke.

DAVID BOWIE ESPERANTO

ch-ch-ch-changes

A flash of metal trash in a vacant lot.
Mirage of glitter in the distance.
Sudden hiss of a tire going flat
on the edge of the universe.
Nobody to push the rest of the way
into freefall. Nobody but gravity.
The end of a beautiful nightmare.
What you would have sounded like
if she'd given you more time.
The churning robot soul sparking
with faulty wiring. The marriage
of a stilt and a crutch. Perfectly tuned
grind. Notes scribbled on the phrases
of the moon. The cynical faith
of the choir of sinners. A pout
and shout. Slippery when smug.
Bridge freezes before road. Cautionary
sneer. The heart pondering a change
of heart.

JOE COCKER ESPERANTO
"we've all forgotten we could fly"

Bleeding is good for your
garden. Miracle cures occur
daily. Demons cast *in*.

Phantom limbs stitched
into dance. Somebody
might love you
if the wind's blowing right.

Full moon eclipsed
by the werewolf's hand puppets.

The accidental completion
of a wobbly circle.
The egg of a mythical beast.

Drastic measures
unmeasured. Crashing
the slurred party.

The beaten dog
returning for revenge.

The smoke
of the last smile
on the last train.

TWO POEMS, ONE CONCEIT

1.

Stars around
like jars hung from
branches of the completest tree.

Each jar filled with a clattering candlelight.

For years I've heard the first noble truth
is all life is
suffering but not right now it's not.

Our train stopped on a siding and we
who are no longer
in transit sleep or look around.

A high speed freight chops past —
a blunted chainsaw my
aren't we fortunate not to have met head-on.

The passenger train stilled on tracks at night
maybe it's a
forsythia branch dropped from a bundle
by someone heading home.

2.

Bellingham is an enormous replica of
a conch upon a hill
composed
of chewing gum and sprockets.

The transit hub is a pencil stub
students holed up in their books
and transients loudly
holding a clothing clinic.

All along the word has been
the first Noble Truth is
all life is suffering but
not right now it's not.

South of Vancouver our train sits on
a siding while
a freight hacks past
like a dull saw dreamily close.

Not suffering but
annoying yes that that kid continually kicks
the bench and counts along
still nothing like actual suffering.

SEWARD PARK

for Larry Knappert, now past tense

Our situation is
Lake Washington in dusk,
silver as an ironing board cover.

Five ducks
troubled by his
saying if there is a God I've got
some questions for the motherfucker
mutter something and swim off.

Seattle. Mercer Island. Us insects.
The crinkly rigmarole
slips into its dimming envelope.

My friend April's taught me to say
motherfucker in a way
that carries with it some respect.

THE COLLECTION

Even two years later, she still gets correspondence
addressed to him. Correspondence. This like that.

Mostly it's his hobby. Coin collector brochures.
Announcements of collector swap meets. His pastime.

A way to spend an afternoon back when an afternoon
needed spending. Before all the silence flooded the house.

He had old currency. Nickels worth ten dollars.
And heavy the bags of it. Musical too.

She needs to sort through it all.
That's what she should do, realize its value.

But what she is thinking is of spending it,
buying gum and soft drinks, maybe a chocolate bar.

Just get face value for mint-condition rarities.
Get them back into circulation. Circulation. The afterlife

where someone else could get them as change
and be joyful at the luck of finding his life's pleasure.

A MANTLE

What she wants these days is to hurt
the world back. Bereavement
may keep her warm
and it's hers to wear as she bears him

into each day's cold.
Let a living man sing what he pleases,
a wife inherits
riddles and a stone. Grief

can be quarried and polished,
loss can be coined.
A widow is a bride of darkness,
like it or not.

She likes it. When he lived
she was smaller. Now she assumes
the great man's coat as though
she'd wrought it. Her anger at last
has found its calling.

FLOUR AND ASH

"Make flour into dough," she answers,
"and fire will turn it into food.
Ash is the final abstraction of matter.
You can just brush it away."

She tacks a sheet of paper to the wall,
dips her hand in a palette of flour and ash,
applies the fine soft powders with a fingertip,
highlighting in chalk and graphite,
blending, blurring with her thumb.
Today she is working in seven shades of gray.

Outside the door, day lilies
in the high flush of summer-
about-to-be-fall. Her garden burns
red and yellow in the dry August air
and is not consumed.

Inside, on the studio wall, a heavy
particulate smoke
thickens and rises. Footsteps grime the snow.
The about-to-be-dead line up on the ramp
with their boxy suitcases,
ashen shoes.

When I get too close she yanks me back.
She hovers over her creation
though she too has a mind
to brush against that world
and wipe it out.

COLD WATER

Whenever Grandma thought
I was pushing my luck, she'd say,
*You're not skating on thin ice —
you're skating on cold water.*

Sometimes instead of just washing the dishes,
I stick a plumber's snake of anger
down the drain, then stop myself.
It's a duet I play with myself.

Here comes the mosquito
for the third time.
The larvae we wondered about
were mosquito, of course!
In the end I do kill it.
One miss, and then I kill it.

Upstream, downstream —
where am I right now?
I don't even know
the river's name.

Poetry's absurd, like building
a bird-cage out of birds.
Besides, since every thought was once
a before-thought, all words
are clouds in the mind's afterlife.
I'm a factory, very busy,
a manufacturer of poor quality
word-clouds. Why listen to me?

THE SUFFERING OF THE MASTERS, CHEKHOV WROTE

The suffering of the masters, Chekhov wrote,
affects the entire household, even those
who work in the garden. Which is to say,
I open his book and my eye finds that,

like I found a window once, looked out
to a car, a guy bent to an open door
sullenly arranging, rearranging
for a long trip. Chekhov was hot,

she tells me. And we stare into his picture
on the cover: short hair, a new beard gone
slightly ragged, a young man absolute and hesitant.
Equals *hot*, I agree. Equals something —

It's like we know him, I hear myself. Like
he lives around here. Which is to say, they
keep fighting in the story. I open
to another line: Leave me alone, I beg you.

STOPPED BEHIND A SCHOOL BUS, I SAW

Stopped behind a school bus, I saw
the smaller ones run, skip,
burst from the idling open door.
And the larger girl, already so

burdened, pitched forward, the great
sigh of her I could read like words
in any language for *enough*,
for *everlasting*, for *colors that*

darken quickly. The large girl followed
her jubilant sister as if pulled by
a rope woven thick, too many strands.
Early fall, no leaves turning yet,

a little smoke. How the girl moved
behind her sister. Loneliness.
You count backwards for it. So many
things to do. And to become, so little.

CARE

If I spoke to you now
something I'd say
formed out of words
you could recognize

what would you hear?
Saying and hearing
live in two separate
worlds and we can't

always bring them
together. I don't know
what you're hearing
when I say a word

that means something
special to me. What
does it mean to you?
"Care" for instance.

"Instance" for instance.
Waves of meaning
lap over each other
and leave only froth

on the shore. OK
to wade in or sit
on a beach chair
there with your toes

in the water, diddling
the surf. White foam
lathers my toes. Do
you care for my toes?

For instance.

PUSHING

You keep me
young I tell you
the way I do always
though it's not at all true

so I go on squirting
and spraying
putting my strawberry
lipstick on

leaving myself
little notes
all over the place
so I won't forget

if I find them
I'll still know
what I have to
remember.

So I go on pushing
my body up the hill
the way I keep
scrubbing pots

with steel wool after
the pad is worn out.
I'm not ready
to throw it away.

PALO DURO CANYON

My phones are co-dependent — one won't ring
unless the other's plugged in. If you call
please wait until I find you.

I dreamt about you again last night. We drove
to a cemetery to see the stars.

I could smell your hair as I kissed your neck.

Gaps in time surrounded events so that
now could not be salient. Dreamscape was
an eight track circling the canyon, Voodoo
Bliss wobbling fiery cliffs going orange
to red to purple along fluted basalt.

Your aunt walked across one inch of greasy water
to knock and knock and knock on our windshield.

What would it be like if things were different?

That sounds so stupid I shake my head
and hold my ears. What would be different
if things were like themselves? What selves
would like difference if things would be
themselves? What difference would things
want if they were not things themselves but
stars and moon, yellow water snaking down a canyon?

At night you can taste the aftermath of primordial
stellar nucleosynthesis. You can take your shoes off
and walk three miles before cap rock cools to gypsum.

You can yell and hear your own voice fall
through geologic time. Why would you want to?
Why would you wait by the phone for love to call?
Why would you call and call to hear the sound
of your own voice falling backward
through everything you dismissed?

Why would common things chant
this far from public view alone all night?

Why does water shake on the forefinger
or the voice rise for no reason? You should answer
because you have information on the tongue.

Whole systems, celestial salt, the hidden dialect of sea urchins.

THE COST OF HEALTH CARE

(In memory of Cliff Reid)

He died eight days ago when his heart exploded
Just before she saw his forehead
Slam the steering wheel
Before she felt the pickup drift and stop
Still in the driveway
Couldn't pull him down out of the cab
Couldn't lend breath to her gray old friend
After half an hour an ambulance

Now in a hospital room
He hangs above a bed curing
Hangs grotesque and sideways in wires and tubes
If not carcass say mobile
Say wind chimes of bamboo bones
Waiting for a breath
To set them ticking

The doctor you want to kill knows
The family knows yet will not know
And the meter runs on through the days

Sweet biblical women moisten his lips
Brush hair from his eyes
Have I said they're open?
Have I said his color's great?

On the ninth day he's disconnected
Laid on his back
As color once again drains gray
Breath slows stops

Soon she'll stand in her kitchen
Crack open the distended envelope

The bill unfurls across the floor
Thirty thousand dollars itemized
She begins to read them off
All you'll remember is baby powder

A ROOM

He said, *Define a room,*
and because we were in one,
we looked up and around
and down and said, *Four walls,*
a floor, and a ceiling. He said,
What if it has no ceiling?
Is it still a room? Yes,
some of us said, and some
said, *Cubicle.* *If two walls*
are missing? he said. *Still*
a cubicle, one muttered.
Three joined in a triangle?
We kept quiet. *Or if the wall*
is circular? *We take away*
half the ceiling, can we call it
a room? *Rooms don't need windows,*
do they? *What does a room do?*
We sat dead silent now,
no longer feeling like students,
but innocent victims
in confinement. He said,
None of you mentioned doors
or doorless openings
into a hallway or to some space
like another room. He waited
but got no answer. *Suppose*
our subject did have four
firm, well-behaved walls,
a ceiling, a door, and even,
as a sign of progress
and good will, a window
that would open and shut.
Would it still seem to you
like a room if it had no floor?

Some of us looked at ours
uneasily. *If we took away
that hypothetical window
and what stage-setters call
a practical door and left you
to rehearse a final act,
would you have room to dream
of priest holes and sliding panels
and seamless overhead hatches,
and what magicians call simple,
cross, and camera-lens trapdoors?*
We all went home to our rooms.

THE STUDENT

 has a question
you don't know the answer to.
You scan the immaculate shelves — there
is comfort between those covers.

You linger on a slender volume
given years ago,
yet you can recite each letter
penned inside.

 She is saying
your name now, the student,
the strap of her purse encircling
a thin, freckled wrist.
You tell her it's okay
to write about her abortion.

As she presses on, you can't help
but wonder about the father —
whether he's a student, too,
maybe one of yours. A face
appears: a young man you despise
for reasons you forget.
It's his face you picture as she's breaking
the news; his face, remote as a pistol
dropped over the side of a boat.

She knows how precious it is,
she says, and thanks you for your time.
Slowly you pass your hand
over the smooth, passive spines,
her body echoing down the corridor.

Then you retrieve a book you need
not ever read again, let alone
the inscription — burned in
like a star's trajectory, still there
when you close your eyes, you see the shape
of the mouth that mouthed it,
you can't help but hear
that voice.

 You wonder
if she is crying, too —
your student.

And what does that make you.

ANNUNCIATION

— wouldn't say if she took bets
against herself, couldn't say
if she'd heard it would hurt,
heard when it came out
it would scream, couldn't
say she hadn't made love, maybe
so, maybe no. Something
they wanted to take from her,
or was it give to her — she
couldn't say. Nor what's kissed
once, wrapped in newsprint,
left near a stump. That
what. That once was all
it took. Even the boldest headlines
bleed and bleach. Tell me
about it. She wouldn't say if
there'd been a beep, a siren,
or a whisper. If there'd come
an unwanted call or un-
answerable cry. She said
all that's for sure: one
quarter-pound of flesh
paid in full.

FORGETTING WAUKESHA, REMEMBERING ST. HELENA

Forget the evenings of Slivovitz and sloe berry.
Forget drawing the immemorial
off-white latch. Forget willows on the banks
and the willow slips from whence.
All that you try with your mouth can be summoned:
boats the family sank by chopping
holes in the hull when they couldn't afford
Hoover's levy and children resorted
to rides on the dumbwaiter to spirit those prolonged

Wisconsin winters. At Napoleon's funeral,
a young foot soldier tried fitting on
the emperor's hat, hoping to spring to life
for the lachrymal officers and ladies
gathered in cool St. Helena. Having homage
and well-meaning mime in mind.
They were, after all, putting Napoleon
inside four coffins as if he'd breathe like a potato.
It had that solemn air of the ridiculous,
you know, the soldier not getting the hat on square.

MAN READING IN SAUNA

God, or Balzac, could not put the story down
to save the page from thinning out
into wet-holes a slant rain makes on the ocean.
There is love and dispassion in that

large, pink hand cradling
the hard spine of the heavy book. Somehow always turned
to someplace in the middle
where the woman is dropping her purse

on a bed in the Hotel D'Eclisse
or the man is boiling ham hocks distractedly
with the TV turned to a Saturday movie.
Most of our energies we spend engaging the disengaged

man in the sauna. His long back red
in patches with white hairs growing out of liver
spots, and a backbone
volleyed between slopes of fat and shoulder blades.

When he turns over the page forever
we notice the woman waiting in the rented room
has bleached the furniture
and is leaning out on the terrace consumed by the rain.

GARDEN

Peas snug in their sweet green
coats, tea snug in its thermos,
absolutely orange tomatoes. Mice
root and clack and fill
their little lungs, each eye bright
as a berry. It is easy to forget Hell
here, and that is what we talk about:
Hell, and forgetting it. Once
I tried to save a bee, named
and cared for and cried for the bee.
In this plot curl the brown brain
rills of rows of seeds almost ready
and seeds spent. I'm tired of it all
being about life and death. We are
navel-gazy, a couple of Uncle Vanyas
woe-ing and alas-ing our way through
middle life. I've dressed this salad
before, searching for people who Get It
while drops pock the pond and
the pincushion of the garden.

It is still Sunday after all this time;
this Sunday is as long as March.
We need to hear our hearts to feel alive,
sometimes in a bitter way, sometimes
a lovely way, hear them too fast
and too hard in order to feel alive.
This might be why people hurt so many
so often: to hear the hearts of the scared
makes hearts beat fast.

No, mice, you are not this way. No,
bees, you are not, dogs, pigs, hens.
But we are, and you are
at our mercy. You cannot forget
Hell for even a day, and so I cannot
either.

THE MONASTERY KITCHEN

The stars are late tonight, says the abbot.
Can you shine? Can you bake a new moon?
The door to the kitchen stands open.
Under the window, cookbooks lean on each other
like invalids. Covers gone, pages stained
and torn, so thin a breath will tear them.

On starless nights, the kitchen lives
in the steely glance of the ovenly door.
Neither clatter nor creak breaks its vow
of silence. Where is everyone?
Let me walk in the light of the big pots,
hooked high in a row like bells without tongues.

Let me rest in the light of the ladles hanging
overhead, the largest leading the flock
like long-necked birds stalking the shore,
yet perfectly still, bearing their scooping bowls —
bright nests for lifting soup from the dark
wells of the pots. Everything in its place,

everything polished to brilliance.
Look down at the wooden table, knife-scarred
but clean. Only the empty stove,
black as new boots, wears mourning
and opens its trap door to the darkness.
The window wakes. A sliver of moon rises.

I thank the light of the kitchen for its kindness.
I touch the stove for luck, and I thank the dark.

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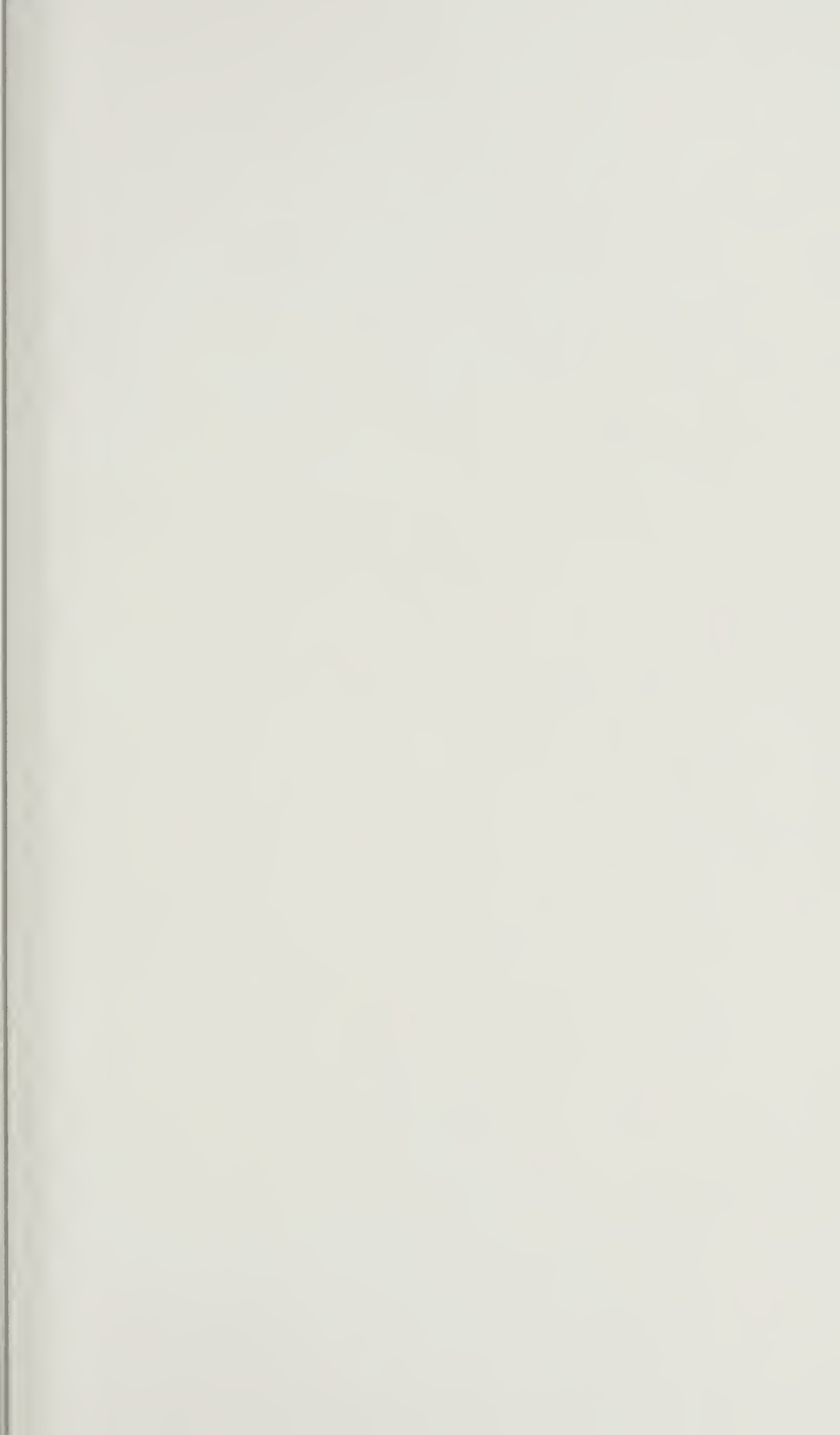
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WILLIE "MA WILLIE" ABRAMS. ROMAN STRIPES VARIATION, c.1975

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